

March 23, 2003/Third Sunday of Lent
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God's Foolishness

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

*The assimilation of Christianity to bourgeois society always means
that the cross is forgotten and hope is lost.*

[Jurgen Moltmann, The Crucified God]

In the days before the declaration of war on Iraq, I struggled with a sense of hopelessness. When I feel this way, I know that I have placed my hope in something that can't bear it, something less than God, something less than Christ. I was also working with this morning's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The "foolishness and weakness of God"—that should grab our attention! God's love in the crucified Christ destroys, or sets aside, the world's wisdom and strength—the clean logic of war, the mesmerizing technology of death, the siren voice that divides us, who are good, from them, who are evil, and the persistent illusion, in spite of century upon century of experience, that violence will end violence. We keep falling for it in every generation, in spite of Jesus' teachings and life pointing us to the truth, calling us to a completely different way of living.

In his book The Crucified God, German theologian Jurgen Moltman reminds us that the cross is a scandal, a stumbling block. It is a scandal to the so-called "modern mind" that looks in the mirror, admiring its progressiveness and ingenuity. But the cross is also a continuing scandal to the church itself, to Christianity. Moltmann writes that whenever Christianity accommodates itself to society, which it does so often, "the cross is forgotten and hope is lost." As I read these words, my mind began to wake up from its dreariness. I felt solid ground under my feet again. Paul and Jurgen Moltmann were saying the same thing: Our hope lies only in the power that comes from the crucified Christ, not the military, political, or religious wisdom and strength of the world. Those are sources of despair masquerading as hope. Only the power and strength of God in the crucified Christ holds out anything for us. What looks to all the world, including us, like failure and weakness is the only true source of life and hope.

Paul was writing to a Christian community in Corinth that was torn apart by factions and power struggles. Those new to the faith were being humiliated, not nurtured. Some were being marginalized instead of included. The church, as Moltmann says, had accommodated itself to society, and the cross was forgotten. Standing in the midst of the Corinthian congregation was not the cross of servanthood power but the destructive wisdom and power of the world—competition, coalition building, and ego-centeredness. The situation felt hopeless because the source of hope had been lost, the cross forgotten.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God, says Paul. The cross is meaningless to those given over to the illusions of power and wisdom spun by the world we live in. The cross is a sentimentalized religious relic to Christians who have given themselves to the values of competition, coercive power, and ways of thinking that dehumanize other people. To live for our own desires and wants, to make the most important value our own security and comfort, is to be perishing at the deepest level of life.

Jurgen Moltmann writes, *Christians who do not have the feeling that they must flee the crucified Christ have probably not yet understood him in a sufficiently radical way.* The cross is an affront, a scandal, and yet it communicates the only power that can truly bring and sustain life. It is the servant power of God who pours out love for the sake of the world, even suffers the world's rejection. It is the Christ who lays down his life, not by taking up arms against those who oppose him, but by a love that exposes the folly of human pride, power, and violence. *For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.* Even the tiniest bit of God's strength and wisdom is infinitely truer than the "best and brightest" of human power and ingenuity. Hearts and minds that are open to the crucified Christ receive and live by this deepest truth. Then no matter how small the effort, how meager the faithfulness, life and hope are brought into our lives and the world.

The inward journey of our transformation as followers of Christ in community with one another is the birthing process of a new consciousness, a "new mind" that is shaped by the crucified Christ. Paul said more about this in his Letter to the Philippians. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.* The mind that is open to the power flowing from the cross is what Kosuke Koyama calls a "crucified mind." It is the mind awakened by the self-pouring-out love of God in Christ. It is the mind that knows God's wisdom that shows itself in servanthood, not in domination, God's strength that comes from vulnerability and sharing, not isolation and individualism. This power gives us the hope to keep going, to keep devoting ourselves to the things that truly matter.

In a conversation with a friend this week, I mentioned feeling depressed by the impending war. She piped right up and said that she couldn't be depressed. In her words, "black folk can't afford to be depressed." What I read into her words was that black Americans have had to face so many despairing situations, have been under assault and lived under terror for so long, that to give in to despair is to lose what hold on life one has. In his book The Spirituals and the Blues, James Cone of Union Theological Seminary [NY] wrote about the spirituals and "sorrow songs," as W.E.B. Dubois called them, what they meant to slaves trying to survive inwardly and outwardly the terrorism and oppression under which they existed. Slaves drew strength and hope from the religion they had learned from whites, but translated into their experience. They understood that the cross was no longer a scandal to their white "Christian" oppressors.

They knew the true power of God in that cross. These people “were impressed,” Cone writes, “by the Passion [of Christ] because they too had been rejected, beaten, and shot without a chance to say a word in defense of their humanity.” “If Jesus,” Cone continues, “was not alone in his suffering, they were not alone in their slavery. Jesus was with them! He was God’s Black Slave who had come to put an end to human bondage.” [pp. 52, 54] The slave knew that in some mysterious, profound way the cross was the deathblow to the false “strength” and “wisdom” of the world. Therefore they could sing, “Keep your hand on the plough, hold on, hold on!”

I took my friend’s words to heart. Instead of sinking into cynicism or despair, we can refocus ourselves where we needed to be all along--on the cross of Christ, whom we are following. We can hold more dearly onto the life and teachings of one who showed the way of true strength and true wisdom, the strength of compassion and of fellowship with those whose needs continue to go unmet, the wisdom of forgiveness, reconciliation, and community, not just with each other, but with all God’s people throughout the world.

This completely baffling question has stuck in my mind for a long time now: Why is it that we can become so highly organized and purposeful, spend so much money and energy, be so aroused in passion and righteousness when it comes to dealing out death, and we cannot mobilize to meet the needs of millions of our brothers and sisters in our own society and the world who are jobless, homeless, hungry, without medical care? We are spending upwards of \$100 billion for this war, and we are cutting human services even further. All those columns of soldiers, machinery, and aircraft moving across the Iraqi desert, destroying cities, the environment, and people, and we cannot mobilize for life! We call strength that which is weak, and wisdom that which is folly.

So, what is Christ calling you and me to do in order to bear witness to the different kind of strength and wisdom that comes from God? We can affirm the gifts God has given us to express new life in the world. We can look with renewed clarity and perception at the needs of people and the ways in which we can relieve suffering. We can deepen our practice of prayer, so that we are grounding our lives in God alone and in the strength and wisdom that flow from the crucified Christ. We can thus live our lives as a protest against the pretending strength and wisdom all around us. We don’t have to let our depression, despondency, or hopelessness control us. We will feel anxious. We will feel depressed. We will feel “what’s the use.” That’s normal for those trying to be sane in an insane world. But we don’t have to let these feelings control us. We can acknowledge them, accept them, not trying to drive them out, for that only makes them worse. Most of all, we can remain rooted and grounded in the love of God known in the cross of Christ.

This is a time for mourning the lives of all who are dying and suffering because of this and all acts of aggression and violence. It is also a time to clarify who we are as followers of Christ and where our hope and power come from. Not from the weakness of the world that only appears to be strong and powerful, and not from the foolishness of the world that sounds so reasonable and wise. But from the foolishness and weakness of God on the cross, which is the only true strength and wisdom.